



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



The Servant

Text: Isaiah 42:1-9

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There comes a day when the days of having the baby present are over.

This year, after having a child live with us for 22 years, Janet and I entered the world of empty-nesters. Both girls are away at college. People tell me that I will be happy about this and enjoy it. At the moment I miss having my babies around the house. The days have having the baby present are over.

We have journeyed through a season of waiting for the baby. We have celebrated the birth of the baby. We have celebrated the bringing of gifts to the baby.

But now the Christmas decorations are gone and the days of having the baby present are over.

Today's Scripture reading is from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Often when people think of Isaiah they think of Isaiah 7:14 about a virgin being with child and that's the main reference we have to the Messiah.

However, there is much more to Isaiah than this.

If you read Isaiah, for the first 39 chapters of the book he is prophesying gloom and doom. Life is good and the people have become happy and complacent and Isaiah is telling them that there will come a day when things will go bad. Very bad.

When we hit Chapter 40 the story is a century later and a different prophet, still going by Isaiah. Only this time the world has changed. The people of Israel are in exile and suffering grievously. Instead of issuing fiery threats to the people telling them that things are going to go bad, this Isaiah speaks words of comfort and hope. And that hope will come in the form of a servant.

When Jesus walked the earth there was an ongoing debate as to what the Messiah would be like. Some said the Messiah would be a new Moses. Others said he'd be a new King David. Two options. Only two options. Jesus didn't identify with David or Moses but identified and took the role of the servant as portrayed by Isaiah. This passage in Chapter 42 is one of four songs of the Servant---magnificent pieces, to be sure.

If you read these songs, you will encounter Jesus in them. It's impossible not to.

The songs, however, speak to more than the character of the Messiah. They spoke to the people of Israel collectively and individually. They speak to us collectively and individually as well. In becoming a servant of God, and in becoming a servant of God's people, in that servitude we find hope.

This kind of role as servant has some attributes to it that make it very distinct.

First, one who is a servant does so gently.

Bombastic people often get listened to. Strong people who issue violent threats often get listened to. Isaiah speaks of one who does not lift the voice, but who goes about doing God's work gently.

Years ago, in Iowa, a Presidential candidate was at a church picnic campaigning before the caucuses. He stood online at a stand where they were selling chicken dinners. They had quarter chickens, and a couple of sides. Not unlike what we did at Harvest Homecoming.

When he got to the front of the line the woman who was putting the chicken on the plates placed a piece of chicken on his plate and began to hand it to the next person when the candidate said rather abruptly, "I'd like a second piece of chicken."

She said, "One piece of chicken per person."

He was a bit put off and he said, "But I'm hungry, I'd like two."

She said, "One piece of chicken per person."

He said, "Do you know who I am?????"

She said, "Yes, you are running for President. Do you know **who I am?**"

He said, "Well, no I don't."

She said, "I'm the chicken lady and I say one piece of chicken per person."

I have always wondered what would have taken place if he had gently said, "Please."

When we serve God we are invited and challenged to do so with great gentleness. In 2 Kings the prophet Elijah is gently rebuked by God because Elijah had used a bombastic display and violence to make his point about God. God gently rebukes him with a still small voice reminding Elijah that God is a God of gentleness, and those who serve God ought to do so as well.

A true servant is one who serves gently.

Secondly, one who is a servant seeks to bring about justice.

There are all sorts of stories about justice.

19th Supreme Court Justice Horace Gray once informed a man who had appeared before him in a lower court and had escaped conviction on a technicality, "I know that you are guilty and you know it, and I wish you to remember that one day you will stand before a better and wiser Judge, and that there you will be dealt with according to justice and not according to law."

The man left the country and was in Belgium. While in Antwerp he broken into a home to rob it. He was surprised by the residents coming home, but he got out with their possessions and fled out the back door, clambered over a nine-foot wall, dropped down the other side, and found himself in the city prison. Justice was served.

This past week in a real life story that combines the movies *Dumb and Dumber* with *Weekend at Bernie's*, two guys found that their friend had passed away in his apartment. They also found his uncashed Social Security check. They found an office chair on wheels and taped their friend into the chair and wheeled him to a local check cashing establishment trying to pretend that their friend was still alive.

To make a long story short their plan did not work as the people on the street outside the check cashing shop were not nearly as dumb as the criminals. Needless to say, they were arrested.

I love dumb criminal stories. They always seem to lead to a resolution that brings about justice.

But that's not the only kind of justice in the world. True justice takes place when everyone is treated with fairness. True justice takes place when all people are treated with equality.

That is God's kind of justice. We are challenged not to try and skew justice the way we want it.

People love to quote the Declaration of Independence, "All men are created equal."

First, Jefferson needed a proofreader. The word 'equal' is used as an adverb in this sentence and it should have read equally. But I digress.

When Jefferson wrote those words he was saying that all property owning white men were equal with one another.

Women weren't. People of color weren't. Children weren't. Poor folks who were renting weren't.

We have spent over two centuries trying to get this right.

God's justice takes place when we do treat one another with equality. No matter what. God's justice takes place when no one is left out.

A true servant of God strives for justice.

Thirdly, one who is a servant keeps at it even when it becomes difficult.

Many historians will say that the greatest leader, the person who changed the last century was Winston Churchill. They say that the greatest leader of the 19th century was Abraham Lincoln.

Winston Churchill's career was dead. In the days leading up to World War II most of the people saw him as an irresponsible old fool whose day had come and gone. He, almost alone, was the only voice proclaiming that Hitler was a great threat.

Churchill stuck to his guns and was proven right. And when England needed someone to lead them in that war they turned to him. What he learned was that being in charge when things are very bad isn't a great deal of fun. England was defeated in Continental Europe and left most of its tanks and guns on the beaches of Dunkirk when they evacuated. They had a small air force and a leader telling them to hang in there that they would one day win. Churchill kept going even when it was difficult.

Lincoln faced dreadful odds as well. His fervent desire to keep the nation intact led him into an unpopular war. Many of the people of the north were as racist as the people in the south, the difference being that they didn't have slaves.

Lincoln's finest generals were from the south and they all went to lead the Confederate Army. The odds of winning this war were slim, but Lincoln kept going even when it was difficult.

Jesus, St. Paul, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Peter, so many of the people in the Bible we read about were people who kept going when things were painful and difficult. They sought to serve God and serve other people and they knew, as said in Isaiah, that they count not grow faint or be crushed, but they needed to stick with it.

Isaiah speaks to us of a servant. Jesus came to serve and we are invited to persistently serve God by serving of all God's people with gentleness and equality.